

Satipaṭṭhāna (11) Observing Knowing and Feeling

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Today I will continue talking about the refrain of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. The refrain is where some of the fruits of mindfulness practice occur. It is where we start having insight and seeing in a new way. The refrain begins with the line:

One observes the body in terms of the body internally, and one observes the body in terms of the body externally.

As I have emphasized, the word “observe” is the fruit of being gathered, settled, and centered here in the present moment. The tendency to be distracted and wander off in thought is minimal.

An image I have of the process is a large bowl. Any marble you drop in will roll back and forth around the bowl. Eventually, the marble will always come to rest at the center. In the same way, as we practice, our attention eventually comes to rest at the center, which is the present moment. The sides of the bowl, where attention is not stable, represent the future and the past. When we are up on the sides, we will inevitably come to rest in the center if we relax. It takes effort and energy for the mind to push the marble up the sides this way and that. Sometimes it takes a little while for it to settle. But eventually, it settles in the bottom of the bowl.

Likewise, our attention settles in the present moment. As it does so, we can simply observe at some point. Knowing and experiencing are not as important anymore. They still occur, and it is important that they occur. But we are settling back, and our awareness is more that of observing and watching freely, relaxedly. Not entangled or enmeshed in what is happening – just seeing it. Not for or against anything, just perceiving it with the mind’s eye – or the mind’s ear, if you prefer that metaphor. Feeling and sensing in the body can also be like this. It is an inner way of perceiving that is deeper than the direct experience of the senses.

The instructions of the refrain are to experience internally and externally. One way I interpret the external mode is to experience things cognitively. The knowing at the beginning of breath meditation – knowing the breath – is a cognitive experience of recognition. We know we have a long breath or a short breath. We know a shallow breath or a deep breath. We know a breath that is fast or slow. We know expansion as we breathe in and contraction as we breathe out. We may know pressure as we inhale and the release of pressure as we exhale. There may be tightening, pulsing, or vibration. All these things are known.

To know is a mental or cognitive act. You know when you could describe it to someone: “Oh, that was expansion. That was a contraction. That was long. That was short.” To have those words requires that your awareness employs the cognitive function of the mind: recognition. I think of that as the external mode.

The internal mode is to sense and feel the experience of something. For example, if I press my thumb and index finger together and look at them, I can recognize that the fingers are touching. I can recognize – I can see – they are pushing against each other. That is the recognition part. But as I touch my fingers together, I can also feel warmth, pressure, and the elasticity of the skin a little bit. I feel hardness and pressure as I push hard. I can recognize those cognitively, but I can also feel those sensations. The feelings are happening within the fingers, and that is inside.

Thus the experience of the fingers touching can be known in two different ways. One is cognitive, as recognition – knowing that the fingers are touching. I can know that it is pressure, warmth, or elasticity that I am feeling. The experience can also be known from the inside. I can be aware of it in the fingers where touching is happening. I can just know, from the point of view of the fingers, how it feels.

So, we have two ways of knowing. One way is to recognize or know cognitively; the other way is to feel or experience. The two ways are closely connected and mutually supportive. They can occur together. It is not one or the other. There is a natural back and forth in the mind between experiencing and knowing, and knowing and experiencing. When the mind is settled and relaxed, it is like standing on a riverbank and watching the river flow by. You may see little currents or waves, but your eyes do not fixate on any one thing. Everything is moving, and your eyes are moving along with it.

It turns out that when our eyes are locked, there is usually tension in our psychophysical system. In their natural, relaxed state, the eyes flow and move around here and there. They do not hold still on a single thing. It would be hard work to find a little point in front of you and hold your eyes there without letting them go. Instead, you can let the eyes wander around the thing. The thing does not have to be big – it could be small. The eyes naturally move around and take in every part of it.

Watching a river can be relaxing because the eyes will naturally move with the flow. Therapists will sometimes encourage people who are feeling stressed or afraid, especially when they are locked into it, to look around the room – at the corners, the lines. Sometimes when I am on the computer a lot, maybe on Zoom, I will look for a while at the edge of the monitor and calmly trace its edge. That feels relaxing, and it loosens up something deeper inside.

It can be the same with our inner awareness – with our mindfulness. If it is locked in, it is kind of tense. A healthy way to get settled, gathered in, and concentrated is the very simple – not willful or intentional, but natural – movement of feeling and knowing, knowing and feeling. It is helpful to gently and relaxedly allow each to be mutually supportive. To know I am breathing and to feel the breathing. To know the in-breath and to feel the in-breath. To feel the in-breath and to know the sensation.

That might seem like busywork – like a lot is going on. But you can recognize that it has been happening all along. You might prioritize one. In the beginning, it might mostly be knowing, like in the exercises. Or it might mostly be feeling or experiencing. But each includes the other.

“Observing the body internally and observing the body externally” is to recognize the simple, relaxed, constantly changing, and shifting modes of awareness: feeling or knowing. The process is to recognize that our mind is doing that, more than following instructions to do it, which are just to observe.

As we open our perception to what is happening, we become aware not only of what the experience of the body is, but also that it is known in different modes. Experience is known in the mode of knowing or recognition and in the mode of feeling. Then you get the best of both of those worlds – both of those ways of being. Both are profound and meaningful. It is important not to prioritize one over the other as being *the* way of doing mindfulness.

One way might be easier for you to get centered and focused. If you know that you get more focused using the knowing faculty – great! Go for it. If you get more focused using the feeling faculty, go for it. And if you can get more focused by using the relaxation instruction of the first exercise — relaxing the bodily formations – go with that. The overall movement is to come to a place where we can just observe.

In observing the body internally and externally, I have found it helpful to recognize the natural, relaxed shifting that goes on between knowing and experiencing. It is like sitting on a riverbank, watching the river go by: “Oh, look at that. It’s just constantly shifting and moving.” In this way, it can also be relaxing because there is no fixation.

So I hope that made sense. If it did not make sense, it may one day. In the meantime, do not worry about it. I have found the first exercise of meditating on the breath to be phenomenally useful. If you keep doing it, it probably will keep opening up and opening up. It is just the simplicity of doing breath meditation without trying to do too much or trying all the techniques at once.

Today’s teaching is the foundation for the one tomorrow and the next step in the refrain. In the meantime, throughout the day, you might study the shifting nature of when you know something cognitively and when you know something experientially – and how closely connected they can be if you relax. Thank you very much.